



Kay Ikuma



“They’d call us ‘Jap’ all the time. “Go back, you don’t belong here,” that kind of thing.”

In May of 1942, photographer [Dorothea Lange shot this picture](#) of the Mochida family, identified with their family number tags and luggage, waiting to board a bus that would take them to the Tanforan Assembly Center. Though this photo was part of the censored collection that the military kept under wraps in the National Archives until 2006, this photo is now one of the most recognizable, widely used images to represent the upheaval of Japanese American life after Pearl Harbor. The impact of the incarceration manifests in how even the smallest and most innocent were affected. Kay Ikuma (front row, second from right), is now 78 years old. “I think the picture is used a lot because we’re such a big family,” she says. “I have a brother that was born in camp that’s not in the picture.” Two of her sisters, Hiroko and Miyuki, are the inspiration behind the proposed statue to [commemorate the assembly center at current day Tanforan](#).

I had a chance to sit down with Kay and her husband, Art, who himself was living on Oahu in Hawai’i when the war broke out. He was on his way to an early movie when Pearl Harbor was bombed. Years later, Kay and Art would meet in California through social activities at the [Pine United Methodist Church](#) in San Francisco, a haven for Japanese Americans who were trying to find their community, and get back on their feet.

Kay, where was your family living when the war started?

We were living in Oakland. From there we were taken to Tanforan, and I think we were there under a year, maybe nine months. Then we were moved to Topaz, Utah.

What were your parents doing for work?

They operated a flower nursery. I don't think we owned it, I think we were working for somebody. It's not that we lost that business but they lost their livelihood.

And in terms of your home, there was no one who offered to look after it?



The Mochida family waits for the bus to leave for Tanforan. From back row left to right: Moriki Mochida (father), cousin, Masayo Mochida (mother); second row: Satsuki Ward, Kikue Mochida, Tooru Mochida; front row: Hiroko Mochida, Miyuki Hirano and Kayoko Ikuma

There were neighbors I think who looked after some of our belongings. But my parents struggled, I don't think they had a lot.

Do you remember if your parents tried to talk to you or prepare you for leaving?

No, there was nothing like that. And since we've been back, there was no conversation. They didn't want to talk about it; it was done, it was passed. I wish I was a little

more persistent in getting them to talk about it because they never volunteered anything.

I think that's been the case with mostly everyone.

Yeah I think that's pretty common.

Did you and your siblings ever exchange memories?

No, we really didn't do too much of that. My older siblings, they were really hesitant and their feelings were that they had a good time. But nobody wanted to hear that they thought, so they didn't want to say, "I know this was such a hardship for your family but we really had a good time." And the camp people really took good care of the young people. They had schools, they had a lot of activities. They had these sumo tournaments. They'd give

out prizes like shoyu and little sacks of rice.

So fun things.

Fun things, not a lot of hardship. But my mom was assigned the job of cleaning the laundry room and latrine area, and she would do that at night. I'm sure that was just to earn a little bit of money.

And was your father working in camp?

Yeah, I think he was in some kind of administrative job. He wasn't as available to discuss things with as my mother was.

He was just busy or gone a lot?

He was either gone or — I think the men really got together a lot. I think they suffered a lot. In the Japanese culture, the men are really the head of the households. To be completely beyond their control, they couldn't take care of their family. I think their pride really suffered.



Kay and her siblings, photographed by Paul Kitagaki. From left to right: Hiroko, Satsuki, Kayoko, Tooru and Miyuki (seated).

My father said the same thing about his own father. How old were you?

I was four. We were there the whole time, we were the last ones to leave camp. There were a lot of people who left to go back to school. We know a lot of friends that went back to Ohio but our family was in tact, none of us left.

After camp where did you go?

We came back to San Francisco and they put us in barracks. Some of those buildings are still there down in Hunter's Point.

Do you recall it being worse than the camps? I've heard that people thought the conditions were even worse.

I don't know. We were all so young, everything was done for us. One of the hardest things was getting immersed back into society, like taking the bus to school some place where there was a mixture of people. We had to put up with a lot of taunting, a lot of ridicule. That was hard. I remember that, being teased a lot.

And by kids your age?

Yes, kids in our classroom.

Do you remember what they'd say?

Oh "Japs." They'd call us "Jap" all the time. "Go back, you don't belong here," that kind of thing.

That must have been hard. Art, did you experience any of that in Hawai'i?

If they said "Jap" in Hawai'i they'd get beat up [*laughs*]. We had a great time.

[To Art] What do you remember about Pearl Harbor?

AI: My sister and I were walking that Sunday and the sky was full of black. I thought, "What is it?" And you could feel the earth shake. We saw it all the way from Pearl Harbor. But we didn't think anything. We were thinking of the movie that I was supposed to go to.

Do you remember the moment that you heard that it was Japan?

I remember my mother looking worried. My father became an air raid warden.

What did an air raid warden do?

"Hey turn off the light." "Hey pull those shades down." "Where do you keep

the drinks in the house?” We used to idolize the older guys, we’d hang around the edges. They would tell me to buy them some sodas.

Now there were a couple of camps in Hawai’i, but they were mostly for leaders, right?

More like lawyers and teachers, higher ranking. There was a Japanese school and they closed that down right away.

[To Kay] What did your parents end up doing after the camps?

KI: Both of them ended up doing domestic; house cleaning and gardening. My mother would talk with her friends and finally found a place in the Haight, actually. A friend of hers owned it and we rented the bottom flat. Then we ended up moving to a flat right outside of Japantown on Pine Street. And that’s where we lived when we got married.

How did you two meet?

KI: My family attended Pine Methodist Church in San Francisco through the influence of Reverend Lloyd Wake. After coming to San Francisco from Hawai’i after a brief stint at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California, Art had been “adopted” by a very nice Caucasian family. They were very active at the Temple Methodist Church. The mother was very concerned because all their friends and church members were white and she thought Art should go to a Japanese church so he could meet a nice Japanese girl there. So he came to Pine and met me instead.

It worked out just like she planned.

AI: She was pretty proud of herself I can tell you that.

What’s the history of how Pine became a Japanese American church?

KI: A bunch of Japanese speaking young men met in the basement of the Chinese church. I think that’s how it started. Then it became a church where a lot of young people started coming right from out of camp. It became a big social thing to connect up with other young people.

Do you fear for what's happening right now?

KI: Oh absolutely, it's terrible.

AI: Signs are all the same.

KI: It's all fear-based. And if you have a president that feeds into that it's even worse, so your leaders are leading the charge.



Rendering for the Tanforan Assembly Center memorial

Do you feel like there is a difference between how Muslims and Muslim Americans are being treated?

KI: I think the Japanese were interned due to an irrational fear of sabotage which was fed by racism which already prevailed against the Japanese

people. The West Coast was primarily targeted. Those living in other parts of the country were mostly unaware of what was taking place. The racism against the Muslims has gripped the whole country. There is no part of the country which is unaware of what is happening to our Muslim brothers and sisters. "If they're Muslims, they must have terrorist ties." What's very heartwarming to see is how much the silent majority is stepping up nationally to say, "This is not what America is all about." I am so embarrassed that the current leader is so clueless and leading us backward.

For me, the biggest thing is the effect that the internment had on our parents. The hardship they had to go through, the disruption to family life; the loss of dignity; the feeling of helplessness in keeping their families protected; the loss of so much that they had worked so hard to gain.

Was there one moment where that really hit you?

KI: I think very late in my life because I don't think I even thought about it when we were going through the process. It wasn't until after high school I'm sure. I just assumed — when we had reparations — I just assumed it would never happen again. And then all of sudden here we are right in the midst of discussions. I just find it hard to believe.

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